

RECENT CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE INITIATIVES IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF KAICIID WORK IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria has been characterised by a paradox. On the one hand, there exists evidence of progress in the area of interfaith dialogue between both the institutionalized representatives of both religions and growth of Non-Governmental/Inter-Governmental Organisations and activities devoted to fostering interreligious harmony and peaceful coexistence¹ but there continues to be, unfortunately, much religiously informed hostilities between Christians and Muslims, especially in the Northern part of the country.² The recent rise of the Boko-Haram terrorist group and recent clashes between Fulani herders (who are predominantly Muslim) and farmers (who are predominantly Christian) in parts of the country (in the region known as the Middle Belt and Benue state in particular) has served to highlight the latter situation. This report considers the work of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in promoting interreligious dialogue in Nigeria, assessing the impact it has made and reflecting on the potential and limitations of her various initiatives.

HISTORICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN NIGERIA

Nigeria's population is currently estimated to be at 198 Million.³ The country is comprised of thirty-six states and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. Before the

¹ See Callistus Ogoko, *Interreligious Competency and Interreligious Learning in Nigeria*, Öffentliche Fachtagung „Interreligiöse Kompetenz“, Tübingen, 2017

² “Nigeria Christian/Muslim Conflict” <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/nigeria-1.htm>

³ “Nigeria's Population now 198 Million – NPC”, Premium Times, April 12, 2018. The 2006 census had put the population at 140.0 million. Report of Nigeria's National Population Commission on the 2006 Census, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 33(1), 2007, p. 206-210

division of the country into states in 1967⁴, it was divided into four regions: northern, western, mid-western and eastern. There are over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups in Nigeria and many of these groups speak distinct languages.⁵ Religiously, the country's population is evenly distributed between Muslims, who are predominant in the Northern part of the country and Christians, who are mostly in the Western and Eastern parts of the country. Although definitive statistics in this area are hard to come by due in part to the highly politicized nature of the issue,⁶ the Pew Centre Research puts the population of Christians in 2011 at 80 million and that of Muslims in 2010 at 76 million. In percentage terms, this would put the Christian population at 50.8% and the Muslim at about 48%. There has been a marked decline in the number of those adhering overtly to a form of African Traditional Religion (ATR). In 1953 those who identified as neither Christian nor Muslim was put at 33.3% with a significant number of these being adherents of ATR. But a 2001 report had put that number at 10%.⁷ More recent statistic suggests a further dwindling of the number of those who identify with as African traditionalists.⁸

Conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the country have mostly been in the Northern part⁹ of the country with such states as Plateau, Kano, Kaduna, Bauchi and Maiduguri especially being prominent.¹⁰ More recent conflicts between

⁴ The first division of the country into states was in 1967 just before the beginning of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). The country was subsequently divided into 19 states in 1976; 21 in 1987; 30 in 1991 and 36 in 1996.

⁵ "people of Nigeria" <http://www.nigeria.gov.ng/index.php/2016-04-06-08-38-30/people-of-nigeria>

⁶ It is reported by the Pew Forum Research that due to the sensitive nature of Christian-Muslim relations in the country, since the census of 1953, statistic about religious affiliation have not been included in subsequent censuses. (Cf. "Regional Distribution of Christians", Pew Research Centre, December 19, 2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-regions/>)

⁷ World Fact Book, 2001, Central American Intelligence.

⁸ While the number of overt adherents to ATR may have declined, it is a testament to its dynamism that it still continues to inform the practice and theologies of many Christians and Muslims in the country. For a fuller appreciation of ATR see Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, London: SCM Press. 1973 and for discussion of how ATR theologies still shape Nigerian Christian practice, in the case of prayer in this instance, see Ayegboyin, Deji. '...but deliver us from Evil': The Riposte of the MFM and its implications for the Reverse in Mission'. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*. Vol. xxxvii, June&Dec. 2005, p. 33-64

⁹ There are nineteen states which collectively make up what is referred to as 'the North'. These are Sokoto, Kano, Borno, Kastina, Bauchi, Yobe, Adamawa, Plateau, Kebbi, Benue, Zamfara, Niger, Jigawa, Gombe, Nassarawa, Kogi, Taraba, Kwara, and kaduna.

¹⁰ Aliyu Ahmed-Hameed, "Interfaith Dialogue: Preventing Extremism and Interreligious Conflict in Northern Nigeria", *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, Volume 4 (11), 2015, p. 83, references studies which find that between 1980 to 1990 there were at least twenty religiously

cattle herders and farmers have been more in the Middle Belt state of Benue. Other neighbouring states have also been affected. The Boko-Haram sect operates mostly in the North Eastern part of the country and three states in this geopolitical zone have been especially affected: Borno, Yobe and Adamawa. The history of the sect dates to the early 2000s but her gaining of global prominence has come about since 2009 when it transformed from being a 'quietist Salafi' movement to a 'Salafi-Jihadi' group.¹¹

The difficulties attending to the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria also requires some understanding of aspects of the religious history of the country. Islam has had a much longer history of existence in Nigeria than Christianity. There is evidence to suggest that since its first crossing the Sahara in the 12th century CE, there has been, as L. Hickin puts it 'a steady infiltration'¹² of the Islamic religion into the country.¹³ The Northern part of the country can, therefore, be said to have had over nine hundred years of sustained interaction with Islam. But in spite of this long history, the most decisive event which helped Islam achieve its hegemony in the Northern region and gain much of its current prominence is due to the Jihad of Uthman dan Fodio (1804-1810). This Jihad consolidated the status of Islam in the north and helped extend its geographical reach.¹⁴ Following this Jihad, much of the North has been Muslim but following Christian missionary endeavours in this region beginning from the middle 19th century, there has emerged a modest Christian minority in Northern Nigeria as well.

Some studies such as that of Matthew Hassan Kukah¹⁵ have discerned hegemonic tendencies within the ruling Muslim elites during both colonial and post-independence Nigeria and have analyzed the revolutionary reactions these tendencies have endangered in the Christian minority in this region. But perhaps,

motivated conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria. The trend has continued from the 1990s to the present.

¹¹ Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwakpa, *The Boko Haram Reader*, London: Hurst and Company, 2018, p. 1.

¹² L. Hickin, *The Advance of Islam in Nigeria*, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 26 (4), 1936, p. 400-403

¹³ Putting it this way is somewhat anachronistic given that 'Nigeria' as a country cannot be spoken of beyond the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of the two British colonies in 1914.

¹⁴ Is-haq O. Oloyede, *Islam In Nigeria: A Century of National Islamic Societies*, Keynote Address Presented at the International Conference of Islam in Nigeria (COIN) to mark the 30th Anniversary of the Islamic Welfare Foundation (IWF) on Monday, November 24, 2014, at the University of Ilorin

¹⁵ Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Power and Politics in Northern Nigeria*, Lagos: Spectrum, 1993

the most significant factor to have intensified hostilities between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, and in the Northern region in particular, has been the attempt at introducing *Sharia* law in some parts of this region since 1999. Given the secular nature of Nigeria's constitution, there has been an immense outcry, agitation and outright violent reactions against the implementation of the *Sharia*. Some of these reactions have seen the loss of thousands of lives.¹⁶

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

Interfaith dialogue is increasingly seen as a tool that can help foster a harmonious relationship between individuals and communities which orient differently on matters of religion. Although it has a long global history, its modern form is often traced to the Parliament of World Religions which held in 1893 in Chicago. Within Christianity, Vatican II (1962-1965) and the protestant ecumenical movement which led to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 have been instrumental to the promotion of interreligious dialogue as a means, not of removing differences between religions, but of allowing respectful and peaceful relationships to flourish in spite of the differences. Interfaith dialogues have also increasingly received more emphasis within Islam. The landmark document *A Common Word Between Us and You*, an open letter co-signed by many leaders of religious communities within Islam and addressed to prominent ecclesiastical leaders within Christianity in 2007 is often referenced in contemporary Islamic involvement in Interfaith dialogue.

Although contemporary Interreligious dialogue initiatives in Nigeria have emerged almost directly in response to the challenge posed by Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, there is a long history of interfaith dialogue between Christianity and Islam. Record of both formal and informal dialogues between Christians and Muslims taking place even before Independence is provided by Peter Ottuh and John Ottuh in their paper "Christian – Muslim Relations in Nigeria: The Problems and Prospects".¹⁷ These dialogue initiatives, while helping to project an

¹⁶ Conflicts over Sharia led to the loss of thousands of lives in Kaduna in 2000 as reported by the International Crisis Group ("Northern Nigeria: Background to the Conflict, 2010)

¹⁷ Peter Ottuh and John Ottuh, Christian – Muslim Relations in Nigeria: The Problems and Prospect, *AFRREV IJAH An International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 3 (2), 2014, p. 57.

image of interreligious cooperation between Muslims and Christians, have, however, not often had a lasting impact in terms of forestalling the persistence of hostilities between adherents of both religions.

KAICIID DIALOGUE INITIATIVES IN NIGERIA

The King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) was inaugurated on the 26th of November 2012 as an Intergovernmental organisation “whose mandate is to promote the use of dialogue globally to prevent and resolve conflict to enhance understanding and cooperation”.¹⁸ Headquartered in Vienna, Austria, the Centre is jointly funded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabi, the Kingdom of Spain and the Republic of Austria.¹⁹ It is governed by a nine-member board of directors who oversee its activities and provide strategic direction for the Centre’s work. Its executive day-to-day running is overseen by the Secretary-General who is assisted by an assistant secretary general and a director general. The Centre has a memorandum of understanding with various organisations within the United Nations as well as the African Union²⁰ and is internationally recognized as a foremost interreligious dialogue organisation.

KAICIID’s current work in Nigeria builds on the knowledge gleaned from her early fact-finding missions to Nigeria which resulted in her inaugurating its first meeting of various stakeholders, drawn from both religious organisations and civil societies, in September 2016.²¹ After this first meeting, a ‘central coordination committee’ was set up and this committee held its first meeting in October 2016. The committee’s membership was evenly spread – fifteen were Christian and another fifteen were Muslim. The action plans agreed upon after this meeting focused on providing viable intra-faith foundations for the work of interreligious cooperation and peacebuilding.²² In 2017, a second conference was held which resulted in the establishment of the “Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace [IDFP], a locally owned, and legally registered entity that works on the promotion of

¹⁸ <https://www.kaiciid.org/about-us>

¹⁹ <https://www.kaiciid.org/kaiciid-agreements>

²⁰ <https://www.kaiciid.org/who-we-are/our-partners>

²¹ This first meeting was in the form of a conference termed “Coordinate to Achieve Interreligious Dialogue”

²² <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/kaiciid-convenes-first-meeting-nigeria-central-coordination-committee>

interreligious dialogue for peace in the country”.²³ KAICIID works with this local organisation to pursue her interreligious and peacebuilding work in Nigeria. IFDP engages local actors and mobilizes for interfaith cooperation in Nigeria. It also undertakes advocacy and other interfaith promotion activities in the form of education and awareness raising campaigns. Other important initiatives established and/or promoted by KAICIID in Nigeria include ‘Adoption of a Joint Action Plan for Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding in 2018’; supporting of ‘advocacy efforts to ban hate speech, including a draft bill, in collaboration with the IMC²⁴ and other partners; and provision of technical advice in the area of interfaith and peacebuilding work in Nigeria. KAICIID works closely with other interfaith and peacebuilding organisations in the country such as the Kukah Centre²⁵, the IMC, and the Institute for Peace and Reconciliation.

Besides these ongoing initiatives and collaborations, KAICIID continues to support interfaith initiatives in Nigeria through its recently established ‘Small grant project’. Funds for this project were provided by KAICIID and applications were called for from local Nigerians to propose projects which aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding in various forms ranging from media, interfaith education, prevention of electoral violence and hate speech amongst others.²⁶ Some students from Kaduna State Polytechnic were awarded the grant which was employed in promoting interfaith dialogue on the campus of the Polytechnic.²⁷

Given that KAICIID’s work in Nigeria has merely been on for less than five years and it has recorded quite significant achievements as well as earning the respect of many stakeholders within Nigeria, her work in the country is to be commended.

²³ “Nigeria Country Programme” KAICIID, July 2018, <https://www.kaiciid.org/file/331806/download?token=gdCG4-8Z>.

²⁴ IMC – Interfaith Mediation Centre: a Nigeria based ‘non-profit, non-governmental, faith-based organization which specializes in Muslim-Christian dialogue and mediation’.

²⁵ The Kukah Centre was established by the Roman Catholic Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah as a research Think Tank focused on issues around Faith and peacebuilding.

²⁶ https://interculturalleaders.org/an_opportunity/submit-applications-for-kaiciid-nigeria-grants-2018/

²⁷ <https://www.kaiciid.org/publications-resources/project-snapshot-nigeria-small-grants>

EVALUATION OF KAICIID WORK IN NIGERIA

A significant methodological challenge faced by Interfaith dialogue initiatives is that it is sometimes difficult to assess their success or failure. In other words, it is not always easy to tell if the goals set to be achieved by these dialogue initiatives have been achieved. Richard McCallum of the Centre for Christian-Muslim Studies in Oxford has attempted a helpful study of how to assess these initiatives in two recent articles published in the journal *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*.²⁸ Using the Cambridge Interfaith Programme organized between 2011 and 2015, he finds reasons to think these initiatives or at least the case of the Cambridge programmes, are helpful and are not merely formalities (as some think Interfaith Dialogues are). It is not our concern to assess the merit or otherwise of McCallum's study but merely to note that concerns about the impact of interfaith dialogues and peacebuilding initiatives are not peculiar.

It is hard to tell now how much KAICIID Dialogue initiatives have achieved. This is in part due to the fact that the initiatives have only been implemented and aim at long-term, sustained goals. The multiplicity of KAICIID's dialogue initiatives in Nigeria also mean that there are many areas to consider. Also, unlike McCullum's study which is based on empirical social scientific methods, any evaluation offered here is bound to be subjective as statistical data on KAICIID's work has not been collected. But we may offer judgements on the merits and otherwise of the various initiatives even if admittedly, these judgements cannot be said to be 'objective' in the scientific sense.

First, as has already been mentioned, KAICIID must be commended for its work. In particular, its particular approach of mobilizing strategic stakeholders and collaborating with local agencies serves to broaden its influence. Because it is perceived to be a secular organisation without any ideological agenda, both religious and non-religious groups are able to loosen their guards, so to speak, and collaborate with it. A certain weakness of interfaith initiatives led by particular

²⁸ 1. 'Towards a framework and methodology for the evaluation of inter-faith initiatives', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 27/1, 63-81, 2018. 2. 'Evaluating Inter-faith Initiatives: A Cambridge case study', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 27/1, 83-103, 2018.

religious bodies, whether it be churches, mosques or religiously affiliated institutions of learning, is that they may be perceived by the religious other as merely using interfaith dialogue as a façade to cover ulterior motives. That KAICIID is not affiliated with any religion and has a board of directors whose members are from different world religions surely helps it project a professional image. Further underlining KAICIID's professionalism is the fact that it has a dedicated programme manager for its work in Nigeria²⁹ and also has a Nigeria 'field expert'.³⁰

KAICIID approach of working with local agents (as with its helping to found the IFDP) means that it appreciates the need to engage 'from below' and the need to have local buy-in and indigenous-led growth if its work is to be sustained. This is to be commended as well because it goes without saying that if interfaith dialogues are to be successful in any context, they must be seen to represent the aspirations of the locales and reflective of the collective hopes of the people. Unlike international business, interfaith dialogue, even if originating from an international context, may not achieve its purpose if it is led by expatriates *directly*. KAICIID's collaboration with interfaith and peacebuilding organisations which were already in existence also makes much sense in this light.

Interreligious education is recognized as having a transformative impact on those who receive them as it helps replace stereotyped knowledge of the Other with well-informed understanding. Testimonials of many participants of interfaith educational programmes often have participants thankful of the deep knowledge of the other religion acquired as well as the empathy developed through that knowledge. KAICIID's 'Africa Fellows' programme, which helps to train educators and those in positions of influence in various fields of practice in the vital competencies of interreligious dialogue is a step in the right direction. A number of the fellows have come from Nigeria and the extensive alumni programme ensures

²⁹ The current programme manager for Nigeria at the time of this writing is Marlene Rabl (cf, <https://www.kaiciid.org/what-we-do/peace-and-reconciliation-through-interreligious-dialogue-nigeria/marlene-rabl>)

³⁰ The current Nigeria field expert at the time of this writing is Joseph Tanko Atang (cf, <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/media/joseph-tanko-atang>)

that they continue to be kept connected with KAICIID even after the end of the fellowship which lasts for a year.³¹

Another challenge faced by many interfaith organisations, and in Nigeria in particular, which KAICIID has so far not suffered, is funding. Because KAICIID is well funded it does not have difficulty with carrying out the many projects which she undertakes, not only within Nigeria but in many other countries and regions as well. This however come with a possible weakness, given that the funds come from particular countries whose relationship with one another may well change in the future and also given that these funds are tied to external controls, there is the real danger that should there be any major changes in any of those two factors just mentioned, it might be hard to see the work already begun by KAICIID being sustained. Recent protests outside the headquarters of KAICIID in Vienna following concerns about Saudi Arabia's human rights record³² and the fears about Austria considering no longer funding the group are recent cases in point.³³In the more likely scenario, however, that the countries continue to fund KAICIID, we can remain optimistic still that the initiatives already started would yield fruit.

CONCLUSION

KAICIID, since its formation just about six years ago, has acquired the status of being perhaps the most international and prestigious interreligious dialogue organisation. Its various interfaith initiatives carried out in Nigeria are but one instance of its other illustrious peacebuilding and interreligious dialogue promotion activities it is involved in places such as Myanmar, Central African Republic, the Middles East and other parts of both Europe and Asia. It is believed that these efforts are commendable and that they have the potential of really having lasting impacts in the place where they are currently being undertaken. As with all interreligious and peacebuilding work, it is easy to be cynical and to wonder how much is really being achieved especially as hostilities continue to rein even in these very contexts where these dialogue initiatives are being undertaken. But as is now

³¹ <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/events/africa-fellows-programme-2018-training>

³² <https://twitter.com/AlevKorun/status/819846876702842880>

³³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/idIN6257389320150118>

recognized, religious conflicts are rarely only about religious differences. There are often social, economic, political and even idiosyncratic motivations behind these conflicts. It is surely asking too much of interfaith dialogues that they can only be judged successful only if they help totally eliminate religiously informed conflicts. If this caveat is borne in mind, one may be able to appreciate the important work being done by KAICIID in Nigeria.

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